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AUTHOR Rowbottom, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

Guidelines employed by the Neighborhood English Scheme (Brent) in London, England, to insure that student placement interviews are purposeful and effective are outlined. Ideally, a successful interview results in the student being placed in an English-as-a-Second-Language class that is at a convenient time and location, at an appropriate level, and of a style of instruction that is suited to the student's learning needs. The aims of such interviews are listed in this publication as are pre-interview preparation procedures. Guidance on asking questions and conducting the interview is also provided. The process of assessment is discussed at length with specific recommendations for the assessment of oral skills, and reading and writing skills. Skill levels for each of these areas are described. Finally, the publication lists guidelines for ending the interview. (JL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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INITIAL INTERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT IN ESOL

The neighbourhood English scheme in Brent, reviews its approaches to interviewing and assessment regularly. In this article, Nancy Rowbottom, Lecturer, ESL/Literacy, sets out the guidelines which they use to make interviews purposeful and effective for students and tutors.

For the Scheme the main purpose of initial interview and assessment is to place students in an appropriate class. It also provides necessary information for record keeping which can assist the class tutor when a student arrives in class for the first time.

For the student the purpose is to find a way to start or continue to develop their English language skills. Ideally, therefore, the result of a successful interview is a student placed in a class at a convenient time and place, at an appropriate level and of a style suited to their learning needs. Records would have been kept, tutor informed and the student would feel confident they had made the right decision.

The guidelines that follow have been drawn up with reference to Neighbourhood English Scheme (Brent), where there are 8 people who interview on 4 sites. There are over 70 classes on 40+ sites across the borough at a range of levels, and varying styles of provision. The procedures are constantly under review and what follows reflects our current approaches to interview and assessment.

Aims of Interview

- to welcome new students to the scheme
- to place in appropriate class/provision
- to have a non-stressful, non-testing interview
- 20-30 minutes in length
- to keep accurate records and monitoring with the minimum of paperwork
- to assess oral, reading, writing level

Interview Procedure

For the student the interview situation itself may cause stress. It should take place in a suitable environment and relaxed atmosphere. Ideal conditions are rare, but the following points may help to make the best of what is available.

- In a private area
- Arrange furniture so student will feel comfortable
- Non-threatening, e.g. chairs same height
- Have all relevant papers to hand
- Ask others not to interrupt, put the answerphone on
- Use welcoming body language
- Give full attention – listen now, write later

Asking Questions

Most students are familiar with giving personal information but this may still create some stress as the student is not speaking in their first language (unless an interpreter is used) and they may also not wish to discuss their previous experience. This means the interviewer must give careful thought to the questions asked, the phrasing of them and must be able to discern between reluctance to give information and difficulty with language.

- Explain purpose and form of interview
- Tell students they do not need to answer all the questions
- Beware inadvertent undermining of confidence through your reactions and comments, especially in the areas of previous learning and work
- Use everyday language, but not confusing idioms
- Although this is a conversation, keep your side to a minimum – you are assessing student's level.

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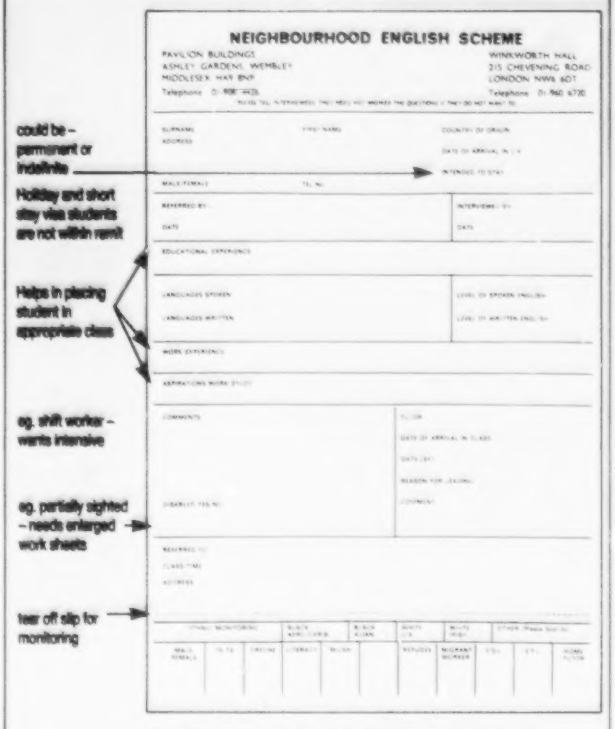

could be – permanent or indefinite
Holiday and short stay visa students are not within remit
Helps in placing student in appropriate class
eg. shift worker – wants intensive
eg. partially sighted – needs enlarged work sheets
tear off slip for monitoring

NEIGHBOURHOOD ENGLISH SCHEME

PAVILION BUILDINGS
ASHLEY GARDENS, WEMBLEY
MIDDLESEX HA9 8NP
Telephone 01-908 4428

WINKWORTH HALL
215 CHEVENING ROAD
LONDON NW6 6DT
Telephone 01-960 6730

3 copies – one for central file, one for class tutor, one remains in book.

Assessment

Assessment is made from the interviewer's knowledge of the levels. We have regular sessions to ensure consensus.

Agree on guidelines to levels. As we operate mostly at three levels, which means that there is a range within any level, these are *broad* guidelines and used in combination with the tutor's experience and knowledge.

Oral Levels – Guidelines

Level 1:
Someone beginning to learn English with, at most, a little passive knowledge. Probably a recent arrival.

Level 2:
Can ask/answer questions of information – has a 'survival' knowledge of oral English. Can probably understand a lot more than can express.

Level 3:
Can hold a conversation at greater length and speak with more confidence, but may be limited on abstract topics. Is able to give opinions. May have fossilised errors.

Level 4:
Can understand most TV and radio. Can give opinions and argue in English, but may be conscious that the adult personality cannot be expressed the same way in English as the first language (e.g. sense of humour). May have a number of fossilised language errors and culturally inappropriate strategies.

Level 5:
Does not feel that the personality is much affected when using the second language. Fluency in all English language skills.

Reading Levels – Guidelines

Level 1:
Student can recognise only a few social sight words in context. May or may not recognise and be able to name letters. May recognise some high frequency words.

Level 2:
Can recognise letters, upper/lower case. Can recognise a wider range of social sight words. Is able to recognise most high frequency words. Has some word attack skills. Can read basic readers.

Level 3:
Can read longer texts and tackle unfamiliar words using phonic and context cues. Has an awareness of the different reading skills e.g. scanning, skimming and inferring.

Level 4:
Can read a wide range of texts, difficulties only arising through unfamiliar vocabulary or lack of knowledge of subject. May feel the need to work on such areas as inferences, underlying meaning and style.

Level 5:
No apparent difficulties with reading. Reads English for pleasure.

Writing Levels – Guidelines

Level 1:
Can write name and address but may confuse upper/lower case. May have difficulties forming letters. May be able to copy simple sentences.

Level 2:
Can form letters upper/lower case. Can complete a simple form. Can write simple sentences. Can use basic punctuation. Has some strategies for spelling.

Level 3:
Can write connected sentences. Understands that style and layout depend on reason for writing. Knows when to use most common punctuation. Has a range of strategies for spelling.

Level 4:
Can write at greater length in a range of styles e.g. narratives, descriptions, formal letters, etc. Uses full range of punctuation.

Level 5:
Can plan, structure and write at length for a full range of purposes. Can summarise. Can use stylistic devises. Uses an extended range of vocabulary.

- Agree on oral levels using student recordings. These can be by students in classes. Choose a range of levels and similar content. Through discussion and reference to guidelines, consensus can be reached.
- Agree on reading levels through discussion of student response to tasks. Although texts used may vary from interview to interview, the procedures, and approaches are agreed beforehand.
- Agree on writing levels using samples of student writing.
- Review regularly

Assessment of Oral Level

The language assessed is that used by the student during the giving of information and discussion with student of their background and needs with regard to time, –place, –creche, –style and pace of class. It may be necessary to encourage the student to speak more. A range of general topics can be introduced, which fit naturally into the conversation rather than a task such as describing a picture, which would often be perceived as a confusing switch, and testing, possibly threatening.

We have tried a range of approaches and methods of assessing oral level including "can do" tick off charts, but have now agreed that there is no suitable, effective 'formula' for initial assessment of oral level *in the context of an initial interview*.

To make an assessment, the most important element is to *listen*. Listen to:

- the effectiveness of communication – do you understand without further clarification?
- student response to questions. Does the student understand without rephrasing?
- structure of language – fossilised errors?
- use of vocabulary – wide? limited? Does student find appropriate words?
- pronunciation – does this make understanding difficult?
- ntent – i.e. the information you need, and so that you can spond.

Reading and Writing Assessment

The procedures used have been developed bearing in mind the following:

a) most ESL speakers have literacy skills in their first language, varying from minimal to highly skilled.

b) ESL speakers have not "failed the system" in the way that many first language English students have. They often approach learning to read and write in English as the acquisition of a new skill.

c) All students in this scheme are assessed on oral, reading and writing levels. Most classes are integrated skills classes with varying emphasis depending on student needs. These are based on oral level. Students at level 2 and above who express a wish to improve their literacy skills are placed in an ESOL/literacy class, based on reading and writing level.

The inclusion of literacy assessment for all students is a recent addition to our interview procedure. The reasons for inclusion are:

a) It gives a clearer picture of students' language skills

b) It helps in placement where there is a choice of class.

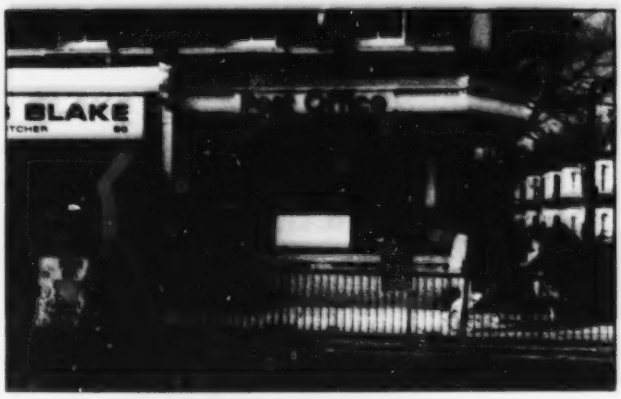
c) It gives the class tutor more immediate information when the student arrives in class.

d) It reflects the increasing demand for ESOL/literacy.

Assessment of Reading

By this stage in the interview, the student feels more relaxed. Tasks are used to assess reading, graded so that the student can demonstrate the skills they already have.

- Talk about reading – how the student feels, what they read in English.
- If the student claims little reading skill – use social sight photos. If possible make a set from the local area, this works well. In our experience almost all students would recognise "Post Office" or "school". If these words present difficulty there is no need for further assessment.



Further tasks

- getting information from a notice board
- reading a form
- a short paragraph of relevance to students

Assess level through response to tasks rather than reading aloud

Ask student to find 'MONDAY'.

Watch student's eyes – are they scanning or reading every word?

Give help if they get stuck at the top.

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Other possibilities: ask to pick out other words, ask to show words they know ask who, what, when?

Extracts from A Day in The Life
Buchi Emecheta (Sunday Times magazine)

Possible approaches:

Explain where text comes from. Ask student to read silently.

Watch for signs of stress. Watch eye movement. Stop if necessary.

Ask:

Is your day different?

Can you guess what this word means? squabbling

What do you think her job is?

Do you think she has a busy life?

"My day starts around 6 a.m. I am awake an hour or two earlier, but I don't get up: I lie there and plan all I would like to do during the day. We have been a one-parent family since I was 22 and my five children ranged in age from seven months to five years old. Now they are all in their teens.

When I get up, I usually put on my track suit and run round the block, once. By the time I return from jogging, the children are in the kitchen, squabbling over breakfast.

Sometimes late at night I go through what I have written in the day, but in most cases I read other people's work and listen to the radio."

Discuss:
students feelings –
how difficult/easy was it?

In this task we are assessing how far a student can get meaning from a text and looking at their approach. The questions asked depend on the skill and confidence shown by the student and interviewers take their cues from that.

Assessment of Writing

This is possibly the most stressful part of the interview, so care needs to be taken that the approach is light. Students should clearly understand that this is to help decide which class, not an entrance test.

- Talk about writing. How does the student feel? What does s/he need to write? What difficulties does the student perceive?
- Ask student to write name and address (have a decent pen and paper ready).
  Watch how s/he writes:–
  - how is the pen held?
  - how is the paper positioned?
  - how easily does s/he write?
- Look at writing:–
  - use of upper/lower case
  - letter formation
  - position of writing on page
- If the student writes their name with difficulty, no further assessment is needed.
- Discuss what the student could write next. Give help – agree on a short sentence, student writes it, or copies it.
- Give students with more writing skills time to write further on an agreed topic. Look out for signs of stress. (You can be writing too – filling in the details on the form).

Example of student writing

Books are my best friends but-
I like reding and writing to very well
but my English is poor. Oneday
I saw a advertsie in a news paper
about English Classes, I was
realy happy to come and joan
aland the Classes

These samples were written at initial interview. They both demonstrate skills and difficulties. The assessment was made using these examples combined with discussion on writing.

I like my cantry because it mens so much
to me, that i can go for sweeming and the
in the sun shine and i can go for fishing
i like fishing and eting them.

In making an assessment look at:

- the effectiveness – do you understand it?
- structure – e.g. length of sentence, word order, tense use
- vocabulary – appropriate? limited?
- spelling, punctuation
- layout
- legibility

Listen to what the student says about:

- skills they already have
- skills they need
- problem areas
- their aims and objectives

Ending the Interview

- show the student what you have written
- agree class, place and time
- give instructions on how to get there
- give student details of class
- invite questions

If we now refer back to the aims of the inteview – have they been fulfilled? We think so:

- The student knows at least one friendly face in the scheme and feels that every effort has been made to make them welcome.
- the student has been placed in provision. (If that is not possible, as occasionally happens, given a definite referral elsewhere).
- there should have been minimum stress.
- the time taken is from 20-30 minutes. This may sound impossible and some situations take longer than others, but this is the average time taken.
- all the interviewer's paperwork is done.
- assessment has been made.

Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit, Kingsbourne House, 229/231 High Holborn, London WC1V 7DA. Telephone: 01-405 4017
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